

E36/8 Z3 M Coupé

The coolest, quirkiest and fastest M car of the 1990s has been rising in price lately, and if ever there was a time to buy one, it's now. You won't regret it...

Words: Simon Holmes Photography: Dominic Fraser

When BMW released the Z3 M Roadster back in 1996 it should have been one of the company's finest hours. Taking the Z3 chassis, pumping up the exterior styling with a dose of steroids and shoe-horning in a 3.2-litre engine from an M3 should have made for a car with performance and aggressive looks. Unfortunately the truth is that although it came close to hitting the spot, the Z3 chassis suffered from a scuttle shake in basic form and, despite the added suspension that went with it, the huge power increase quickly highlighted the fact there wasn't enough structural rigidity to really make the most of the package. Road testers were quick to point this out and BMW was quick to respond, with a Coupé version introduced less than a year later. It was built to cure the issues the Roadster suffered from by adding a much needed strength back into the car. The obvious way to do this was by adding a roof section to tie the car together front and back. However, as the Z3 had been designed as a convertible, adding a rear structure and a hatchback quite altered the car's proportions quite radically, giving it a slightly odd-looking breadvan-like stubby end attached to a long sweeping bonnet. With its stout, pumped-up arches and short, high roofline it undoubtedly was a quirky creation. But it worked and, topped off with four tailpipes peeking out from the rear, it looked purposeful, functional and aggressive. The roof did what it was supposed to and added the much needed structural strength, creating an awesome driving machine and pushing the Z3 to a notch. It now made the best use of all that steel although without traction control it was quickly

marked as driver's car that commanded respect.

The main reason for this was the engine. The 3201cc straight-six from the E36 M3 Evo produced 321hp at 7400rpm and 258lb ft of torque at 3250rpm. Fuel consumption was 25.4mpg, but that was hardly on anyone's mind as this was a true performance car. Top speed was limited to 155mph and 0-62mph was covered in just 5.4 seconds, but plenty of magazines that tested the car at the time found this figure to be conservative, some recording sub-five-second sprints. An 11.7-second 0-100mph figure perhaps highlighted its performance better; a full second faster than the E39 M5.

The engine came connected to a five-speed gearbox rather than the six-speed usually attached to the S50, apparently due to space limitations in the Z3. There was still room for a revised suspension setup, though, while stiffer springs and dampers, larger anti-roll bars, an improved geometry, a lower ride height, and a wider track (both front and back) were all added to the mix. The massively swollen arches made good use of the wider track and were filled with 17-inch wheels exclusive to the Z3 M, measuring seven-and-a-half and nine inches wide.

Brakes were borrowed from an E36 M3, front and back, whilst the wheelbase was lengthened for improved stability. The rear subframe and suspension was beefed-up to take the extra power and a limited-slip differential completed the package.

Inside, there was a Nappa leather interior that was available in either straight black or a combination two-tone design. The seats were also electric, which was standard, along with air-con. Other neater touches to make the car feel special included an extra bank of auxiliary gauges in the centre console, chrome-ringed M dials, an M steering wheel and an illuminated gear

knob. A better stereo, a sunroof, side airbags and cruise control were just about the only options for the UK market and the price for all that was £40,570. This price dropped to £36,000 by 2000 as the UK fell into line with pricing structure of cars abroad.

In June 2000 Z3 M production stopped while the model series geared up for some changes – the most of importance of which was a new heart transplant. As the E36 M3 was no longer in production, fitting the S50 engine was no longer a viable option. So in early 2001, the Z3 M rolled off the production line once again now fitted with the S54 engine shared with the E46 M3, although a more restrictive exhaust system meant it didn't match the M3's power output. Still, capacity was up 45cc, the compression ratio increased to 11.5:1, power improved to 325hp and torque was now 261lb ft. Small changes, perhaps, but it made a difference and the 0-62mph sprint was now officially covered in 5.3 seconds. The five-speed gearbox, brakes and suspension remained but there were also other small changes to the specification, namely revised gauges (now with grey dials), a tyre pressure warning system, a different diff ratio, and a Chrome Shadow finish on the alloys. Most importantly DSC was added – traction control that helped restrain the car for the first time. In this guise, the Z3 ran for just over a year, production finishing in May 2002.

Despite their ferocious performance and quirky looks the Coupé didn't exactly sell in the thousands in the UK but it did sell very slightly more than the Roadster version. 821 S50 Coupés were sold here and 168 of the later S54 type. That means they are rare, but the cars were quickly identified as a future classic and many were looked after well so there are a fair few around for sale on the secondhand market.



Buying one

The early S50-engined cars are far more common as around four times as many were produced, so keep that in mind if you're deciding whether to look for a later car. There were also plenty of colours to choose from and it's largely a matter of personal preference but some colours are more popular than others, such as Estoril blue. These kinds of colours won't necessarily command a lot more money but will be snapped up quickly when they do come up, so you have to be on the ball if you're after a popular shade. Similarly, some of the two-tone interior combinations are a bit loud for some people so black is the safe choice. Options to look out for were relatively few and far between, but cruise control is handy and watch out for cars with the sunroof because this reduced head room.

The entry-level cars can be had cheaper than you might think but tread carefully in the lower regions of secondhand Z3 sales. There are a few accident repaired cars about, so make sure you know what you're looking at and read the advert carefully, as legally, if it's an insurance write-off this should always be listed. Below £15,000 there's a mix of high mileage, accident repaired or left-hand drive examples to take a pick from. The cheapest HPI clear example we could find was a 1999

model in black with an unusually high 121,000 miles on the clock for £12,950. Not far off that was a silver example with just over 100,000 miles on the clock for £14,000, so they are out there if you wanted some fairly cheap fun. But whilst that might suit some people, most will no doubt be looking for something a little higher up the scale.

Until fairly recently it was possible to get a Z3 M Coupé with a few miles under its belt for less than £20,000 but, aside from the odd find, this now seems to have become the exception rather than the rule. Prices for good, clean cars from private sellers seem to fetch around £20,000 and from reputable dealers the price goes up to crazy levels. We found one example with 12,000 miles on it for nearly £44,000! If you're after an absolute pristine, low-mileage example keep a look out at the independent specialists that deal with these kinds of cars on a regular basis such as 4 Star Classics, Munich Legends, KGF Classics and Classic Heroes. The very best cars tend to filter through these outlets and the prices will reflect that but they can often source a car for you, which is handy. Last of all, don't exclude BMW Approved cars either. We've spoken to dealers who have started sourcing and selling mint examples, so keep an eye out.



Interior

The leather trim wears with age so make sure it's in line with the mileage. Whilst you're there, check the heated seats come on (all cars were fitted with this as standard) and that the electric seats move properly. If not, it may be due to the switch rather than the motor. You can tell by listening to whether there is the correct clicking sound when pressed. Check the auxiliary gauges in the centre console show the time, oil temperature and outside temperature. Fixing them can be a headache. Sticking electric windows and faulty door locks are also common. Windows may be cured by removing the doorcards and spraying the channels the glass runs on with silicon. If that fails then it will take some fault finding, as the regulators, motors, control modules and even switches could be at fault. The Coupé uses a different regulator to the normal Z3, too. Central locking failures on the passenger side or boot are often due to the actuator failing, although wiring can also corrode, especially by the boot hinge. This causes problems with the alarm, too. Other things to check are that the heater blower works at all speeds; if it doesn't then the resistor is usually at fault. It's accessed from the outside via the scuttle panel; cleaning it up with WD40 can bring it back to life but it's best to replace it. The air-con's condensers and dryers can fail and it's not cheap to replace, so check these, too.



Bodywork

Crash damage is perhaps your biggest fear here due to the car's high performance nature. Check panel gaps carefully and look out for anything that appears odd or out of place, especially mismatched colours or odd panels.

There are other smaller things to look out for, too. The boot lock has been known to fail along with the rear washer, so give both a check to see if they work. If the latter simply dribbles water down the bootlid then it will need a new check valve. The bonnet catch and release mechanism have also been

known to cause trouble from time to time, so ensure they're in good working order.

The other main cause for concern is the rear subframe ripping itself off the boot floor. Just like the E46 M3, this is a known issue that can be fixed but it's costly. Lift the boot carpet and have a look for any obvious signs of cracks or damage and then listen out for odd knocking noises under acceleration from the rear. Ideally you want to get it inspected properly from underneath as you don't want to be caught out as this can happen to a car of any age and mileage.



It's still an utterly rewarding, fast and frantic car to drive... and it still feels special



Transmission and drivetrain

The five-speed gearbox is generally a strong unit, though with time and plenty of miles over-enthusiastic gear changes can cause the second-gear synchro to wear. Worn bushes in the gear lever itself will cause it to sit over to the right but it should sit directly between third and fourth in neutral.

The clutch should feel smooth in its operation and make sure there are no signs of slipping. Also, listen out for odd rattling noises on idle from the gearbox area that quietens when the clutch is pressed. It's a sign a new flywheel is needed. Propshaft couplings also wear over time, as do gearbox and differential oil seals.



Wheels, tyres and brakes

First thing to do is make sure the car is wearing right wheels and tyres. The 17-inch wheels were due to the Z3 M and are known as Roadstars. They measured 7.5x17 inches at the front and 9x17 inches at the rear and were the only type of alloys available. They should be fitted with 225/45/17 and 245/40/17 tyres, front and back. Once they're mounted for then check their condition for damage, corrosion and wear. The brand of tyres will also give a good indication of the life it's led as matching brands good makes are noteworthy plus points.



Steering and suspension

There aren't that many problems specific to the Z3 M but now these cars are getting older they are more susceptible to general wear, which can lead to annoying rattles or unresponsive handling. If you feel that this is the case then front arms are often the main cause but also check the regular things like snapped springs or worn dampers, as these are common with old age.

If there's a rattle over bumps from the front end it's usually caused by corroded anti-roll bar bushes, whereas a rattle from the rear end indicates it's a problem with the rear shock mounts. Both of these are often worth upgrading with aftermarket uprated items.

The brakes are shared with the E36 M3 and as long as they're maintained there are no re-occurring issues, although some owners choose to upgrade with fast road or track driving ones.



Engine

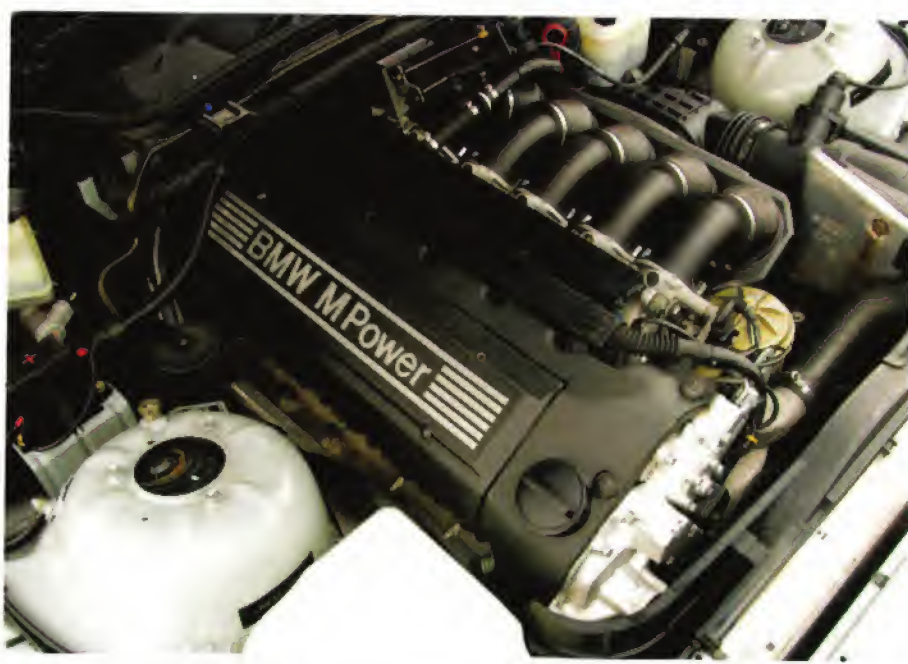
For both the S50 and later S54 engine the main issue is the dreaded Vanos. A few years ago it was the S54 engine that was generally regarded as the least susceptible to Vanos issues but recently it's become apparent that it actually suffers worse than the S50. Whereas the older engine did encounter problems these rarely got worse or caused further complications however with the S54 any Vanos issues need to be dealt with quickly before more damage is caused. These problems can be expensive to fix, so be wary.

It's not always as easy to diagnose a Vanos problem as you might think as there are different components that can fail. If the gears themselves are worn they will cause a rattle, but that doesn't mean that the Vanos isn't still working, so the car might still perform well. On the opposite end of the spectrum, a failed Vanos pump, piston or solenoid will mean a loss in performance and sluggish behaviour without making a noise or turning on an engine light. Also, it's normal for Vanos systems to make a light rattle on a start up but the noise should clear. If it still sounds like a bunch of marbles are being tossed around the top end of the engine when it's hot then you have a

problem. Other more obvious symptoms of a Vanos issue on either engine are a hesitant idle, an engine management light, poor fuel economy and a lack of power under 3000rpm before a noticeable surge. All are signs that the cam timing isn't working as it should as the power should always be progressive. The cost to put an S50 right is around £1000 and the cost to fix an S54 ranges between £700 and £1500.

On the plus side, there's not a lot else to go wrong with the engines, although do be aware head gaskets have been known to fail although it's not as common as on the M3. An S50 with a low idle is usually due to an idle control valve or sometimes a throttle position sensor. An oil leak from the rear of the engine will be down to a worn O-ring below the rearmost exhaust port. Later S54 engines suffer from faulty coils and the odd camshaft or crankshaft sensor failure.

There is one more issue to bear in mind that is particular to the Z3 M and that's the exhaust system. It corrodes over time and is costly to replace so some are swapped with aftermarket systems. This may suit you but take the car for a drive and make sure it doesn't drone.





Verdict

It's arguably the craziest car BMW has ever built in terms of style, power and performance and that seems to have dawned on plenty of enthusiasts more recently. As a result, prices have been climbing and this is no doubt the start, not the end of their new-found interest, so our guess is prices will continue to soar. That means if you have ever thought about owning one then now is the time to commit as there are plenty of Z3 Ms about to have some fun with. It's still an utterly rewarding, fast and frantic car to drive, it still turns heads and it still feels special which is more than enough reason to buy one. With few real problems to avoid now is the time to say you've owned one, rather than in five years time when they are fetching big money...

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